Art, Beauty, and the Problem of Consciousness in Tim Winton's *Breath*

Peter Mathews

Peter Mathews is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Hanyang University in Seoul, South Korea. Focusing on the intersection between ethics and literature, he has published extensively in the fields of Australian and British fiction.

In Tim Winton's novel *Breath* (2009), recently adapted into a 2017 film by Simon Baker, the everyday world is presented to the reader in aesthetic terms. Surfing is thus transformed by Winton from a sport or pastime into something creative and artistic. The world the surfers occupy is described in similar terms, from the breathtakingly beautiful to the downright ugly. Such a strategy is not new in Winton's fiction, which most often seeks beauty within the grotesque, from the gruesome practices of the whaling industry described in his early novel *Shallows* (1984), to the atmospheric terror of *In the Winter Dark* (1988), to the emotionally tortured characters who appear in the stories of *The Turning* (2004). His most famous novel, *Cloudstreet* (1991), is set in an ugly, brooding Gothic house that, in Faulknerian style, heaves, moans, and even speaks to its inhabitants. Sometimes this grotesquery is shockingly visceral: Luther Fox's bleeding feet as he makes his way across the sharp rocks of remote northern Australia in *Dirt Music* (2001), or the casual severance of Sam Pickles' fingers in a work-related accident in *Cloudstreet*, are just two memorable moments that made my own fingers and toes ache in sympathy. In the midst of this pain and ugliness, however, Winton frequently discovers a beauty that redeems and purifies his characters and the worlds they inhabit. While these stylistic elements are part of the natural texture of Winton's writing, in *Breath* they are self-consciously highlighted in order to explore the relationship between human existence (represented by the novel's central metaphor of breathing) and the creative, artistic process.

Much of the criticism focused on this novel, as such, attempts to locate its exploration of this theme within the dominant philosophical discourses about art and beauty. Brigid Rooney, for example, in her essay 'From the Sublime to the Uncanny in Tim Winton's *Breath*' (2014), notes that in 'a distant echo of Edmund Burke's famous treatise on the sublime, surfing in *Breath* [...] is not just about the experience of sublimity, it is

also about beauty' (244). Rooney further characterises Winton's novel, especially its depictions of nature, as influenced by the tradition of philosophical aestheticism—'The natural sublime—as theorised by Western philosophers from Longinus to Burke and Kant—is defined in the encounter of the spectating subject who stands at an implied distance and gazes upon' (245)—an idea that Winton simultaneously exploits and challenges in this novel. In his essay on *Breath*, Nicholas Birns observes similarly that 'surfing for both boys is the acme of their creativity, and their immersion in it is a form not just of recreation but, as the novel's repeated motif of "something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant" demonstrates aesthesis' (266). These critics follow the conventional tendency of seeing beauty from an aesthetic point of view, a perspective on beauty that implicitly privileges the spectator, the viewer who judges and appreciates a work's qualities from outside the artistic process.

Such a perspective has become the dominant mode for approaching art and literature ever since Immanuel Kant's influential treatise on aesthetics, *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The notion of taste, of a rational appreciation for beauty that Kant develops in this book, assumes that the value of a work of art or literature is determined primarily by the individual spectator or reader. The notion of 'disinterestedness' is key to this Kantian perspective—since the spectator views the work from outside the creative process, he or she should be able to apply rational principles of judgement to its aesthetic reception in a way that the artist cannot. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), however, Friedrich Nietzsche encourages his readers to consider the matter from a different angle, from the perspective of the artist:

> Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the 'spectator,' and unconsciously introduced the 'spectator' into the concept 'beautiful.' [...] 'That is beautiful,' said Kant, 'which gives us pleasure *without interest*.' Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine 'spectator' and artist—Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he rejected and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désintéressement*. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal? (104, original italics)

In *The Man Without Content* (1970), a book which opens by citing this same passage from Nietzsche, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben considers how the modern aesthetic perspective that emerges with Kant has profound implications not just for the world of art, but for humanity's deeper sense of itself. He contrasts the ancient Greek experience of art as something powerful and terrifying, epitomised by Socrates's proposed exile of the poets from his ideal Republic, to the detached, ironic, even somewhat bored figure of the modern aesthete. How is it possible, Agamben ponders, that humanity's reception of art has been so utterly transformed? Moreover, he wonders, why has this reversal had such an unnerving effect on the modern artist, whose creativity often sees them teeter on the brink of madness—Hölderlin, Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Artaud, and many more?

Similar questions are embedded in the fabric of Winton's novel, most obviously through the central metaphor of breathing. Early in the story the book's protagonist, Bruce Pike, contemplates 'the enigma of respiration,' noting in particular a sharp duality in how humans regard this fundamental process (Winton, *Breath* 42). On the one hand, Pike reflects, breathing is something that humans generally do in an unconscious, habitual manner. How strange, he thinks, that something so essential for life is, for the most part, taken entirely for granted:

> It's funny, but you never really think much about breathing. Until it's all you ever think about. [...] In a whole lifetime you might rarely give it another thought. Until you have your first asthma attack or come upon some stranger trying to drag air into himself with such effort that the stuff could be as thick and heavy as honey. (42)

Pike thus reframes the dangerous adventures of his youth—breath-holding challenges, surfing, sex involving strangulation, even his first taste of coffee—as 'a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath' (43), an attempt to face off defiantly against life rather than succumb meekly to its dumb rhythms.

> [A]s a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back to it, breath upon breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others. (43)

As such, the novel uses the metaphor of breath to judge and divide the people that Pike encounters, labelling them either as 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary,' a division that correlates to their creative capacity, as though life itself were a work of art.

These intertwined but opposing states make up the aesthetic structure of Bruce Pike's world. The ugliness and banality of his hometown of Sawyer, which extends to the regional hub of Angelus, is repeatedly placed in contrast to the natural beauty of both the sea and the forest, which Pike's parents, in particular, regard as a kind of threat. These two worlds are not merely separate from each other: the commercial world of the town is seen as an active exploiter of its natural counterpart, spreading ugliness by waging war against the splendour of nature. Pike's youthful appreciation for the beauty of surfing emerges out of this dichotomy, which he imagines as a reunification of the human and natural spheres, a world in which humans—and most unexpectedly, men, who are normally the chief agents of civilization's ugliness—can rediscover the beauty of nature:

> How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared. In Sawyer [...] men did solid, practical things, [...] [but] there wasn't much room for beauty in the lives of our men. [...] Loonie and I surfed together, [...] [but] we never spoke about the business of beauty. [...] [F]rom day one I was stoned from just watching. (25–6)

Not yet having learned to surf at this point in the story, Pike is necessarily an observer, but he uses this experience, in accordance with the Kantian model, to set up an aesthetic judgement. This judgement is not merely aesthetic, for Pike's panegyric to natural beauty and his condemnation of industrial ugliness reflects, in turn, an ethical judgement.

This perspective changes when Pike learns how to surf, particularly under Sando's direction. It is not so much that Pike changes his mind about the nature/society split, as that he shifts from being a spectator of surfing to being a practitioner, an artist himself. As Nietzsche understood, seeing art from the inside of the creative process is a very different experience from that of the outside spectator. The spectator may be able to appreciate beauty from a distance, but remaining inherently outside the creative process means that he or she cannot take on any of the risk involved in the act of creation. Although surfing can be a physically dangerous activity, the risk in question, as in any creative action, does not come from its physical aspect—rather, it is existential risk, in which each wave is a kind of *agon*, a test of one's value that deploys physical strength and skill in the same way that a poet deploys words. Sando presents a challenge to the Kantian aesthetic perspective when, following the boys' first trip to Barney's, he flatly denies the value of the spectator in determining the value of surfing:

> Geez, I wish we had a camera, he [Loonie] said afterwards as we chugged back through the forest. It was too good. Shoulda got a photo.
>
> Nah, said Sando. You don't need any photo.
>
> But just to show, to prove it, sorta thing.
>
> You don't have to prove it, said Sando. You were there.
>
> Well, least you blokes saw it.
>
> My oath, I said.
>
> But it's not even about us, said Sando. It's about you. You and the sea, you and the planet. [...] Eventually there's just you and it. You're too busy stayin alive to give a damn about who's watchin. [...] That's what you deal with in the end[.] (76–7)

Sando's removal of the spectator collapses the possibility of judgement and, with it, the whole purpose and value of aesthetics. For the aesthetic judgement is grounded in the assumption that an artist (surfer, poet, or any other kind) performs their creativity primarily for the spectator, an other whose function is to imbue the creative product with value through the act of judgement. But if the true artist requires no audience, as Sando contends, if the triangular aesthetic assumption collapses into a headlong encounter, a struggle only between artist and the creative action, then we suddenly gain an insight into Agamben's question about why so many artists live on the edge of sanity. For the modern artist does not, unlike in the time of the ancient Greeks, experience art as a communal practice, a dangerous but shared task, but instead takes all the risk of creativity onto themselves. If they are truly willing to push the limits of the extraordinary in their art, they end up risking their own self, the very meaning of their existence as expressed in their art. Little wonder then that in this radical isolation so many artists and poets have gone mad. The aesthetic spectator, far from being the height of civilised sophistication, is in many ways a freeloader who, while enjoying the benefits of artistic culture, does not have to bear the risks of creation.

How did we come to this point, in which the perspective of the spectator becomes the main measure of artistic value—epitomised, in this novel, by Loonie's inexorable need for some kind of testimony to his surfing feats? Agamben argues that the late seventeenth century witnesses a dramatic shift in the attitude toward art that reflects, in turn, a monumental change in how human beings understand the

world. Agamben points to the European practice of keeping a 'cabinet of wonder,' a collection of curiosities that the privileged classes gathered as a reminder, in accordance with medieval religious ideas, of the divine unity of the world. In such collections, works of art existed alongside such curiosities as animal parts, unusual rocks, shells, dried plants, and so on, without any differentiation. By the seventeenth century, however, in a world fragmented by Enlightenment ideas, Agamben detects an important shift, exemplified by Marco Boschini's book on painting, in which an imaginary 'scission' (Agamben 36) takes place that transforms the indiscriminate 'cabinet of wonder' into the modern museum of art, a sanctified location in which art can be seen and admired.

> [T]he work of art is no longer, at this point, the essential measure of man's dwelling on earth, which, precisely because it builds and makes possible the act of dwelling, has neither an autonomous sphere nor a particular identity, but is a compendium and reflection of the entire human world. On the contrary, art has now built its own world for itself. Consigned to the atemporal aesthetic dimension of the *Museum Theatrum*, it begins its second and interminable life[.] (33)

It is 'our aesthetic experience of art,' argues Agamben, that 'makes us build museums and makes it appear normal to us that the painting should go immediately from the hands of the artist to a hall in the museum of contemporary art' (32–3). Since art existed long before the advent of museums, Agamben's point is that modernity ought to be viewed as a historical aberration, transforming art by placing it into a sphere that is separate from everyday practice, whereas its traditional function was precisely to illuminate and reveal the value of ordinary life. As such, the art object, as can be seen in the 'cabinet of wonder,' was not viewed as exceptional precisely because *everything* in the world was seen as an immanent expression of 'the divine world of creation' (34). With this separation, Agamben writes, the 'original unity of the work of art has broken, leaving on one side the aesthetic judgement and on the other artistic subjectivity without content, the pure creative principle,' both of which refer back to the museum as a place of spectacle in which the contested line between art and non-art plays out in a 'constant movement beyond itself' (37).

The effect of the 'cabinet of wonder' finds its parallel in *Breath* when Pike and Loonie discover the surfing magazines, which reveal to them that Sando, despite his philosophy of surfing for its own sake, is actually a celebrity. The two boys flick through the glossy American magazines, looking with their own kind of wonder at the photos of Sando surfing on famous beaches, trying 'to piece together a story from all these disparate captions and photos' but 'all we could really glean was the fact that Sando—for a time, and in places that were legendary to the likes of us—had briefly *been somebody*' (Winton, *Breath* 64–5). The discovery of the surfing magazines is depicted as a kind of 'fall', a taste of forbidden knowledge, the effects of which Sando recognises immediately in the expressions of the two boys. 'Before he'd even seen the mags he'd sensed something different in the way we looked at him,' recalls Pike. 'Our admiration for him had enlarged; it had metastasised. I remembered how we leapt out of his way as he lunged for the box. He stood back with it under his arm like a man holding something dangerous and unstable and I had the queerest feeling of having transgressed' (66–7). The discovery of the surfing magazines is thus a turning point in the novel, for while Sando's skills had previously made him seem godlike, it was a divinity embedded in the natural context of his surroundings. The magazines shatter this immanence, elevating Sando to a higher status in the boys' minds that, in its idolatry, removes him from their world: suddenly he is rendered unfamiliar, other, transcendent. The museumification of art and the surfing magazines operate on the same principle, whereby the elevation of creativity also means alienating it, removing it from the immanent power it once exercised over its natural context. Little wonder, then, that the status of creativity has changed so dramatically in the modern world. The dangerous influence that Socrates, for instance, associated with art stemmed from the ability of the artist to influence the social context from which their immanent power flowed. Placing art in a museum bestows on it a certain transcendence, but in the process strips it of its context, making it less dangerous by disconnecting it from direct contact with life. That is not to say that modern art cannot challenge and confront its viewers, but its power is diminished by its sequestration—a viewer can walk away from a work of art, refuse to view it, even remain entirely ignorant of its existence. Such a separation is not possible in a society where the power of art is an immanent part of the context through which one moves and, as the book's central metaphor reminds us, breathes.

As a result, the reader witnesses Pike struggling throughout his life to reconcile this modern division between the immanent and the transcendent. The post-Enlightenment world, accustomed to equating identifying a problem with the first step toward its solution, finds its own logic turned inside-out. If becoming conscious is the first step, as Pike realises about the act of breathing, its advent is also a signal that

something has gone wrong. Now that humanity has been aroused to consciousness, attempting to return to the previous state of unconscious immanence turns out to be impossible, a truth Pike discovers when he attempts to overcome his addiction to adrenaline. The perverse (and ultimately untenable) solution he learns from Eva is to push consciousness to its limits until, through an excess of stimulus (auto-erotic asphyxiation, electric shock), a lapse into unconsciousness is induced. Winton highlights the uncanny resemblance between the life-denying suicide and the differently motivated but equally self-destructive behaviour of the thrill-seeker—despite their outwardly opposite motives, both paths converge with the same nihilistic result, and it is a measure of Pike's experience that he, unlike his younger colleague Jodie, is able to tell the difference when they encounter the body of the dead boy in the novel's beginning.

Across his writings, Winton deploys a number of discourses to try and counter modernity and its obsession with consciousness, from his religious beliefs, to his admiration for indigenous culture, to his love of the natural world. In his recent memoir *Island Home* (2015), for instance, he makes some poignant remarks about the intersection of these discourses when considering the value and purpose of art and beauty:

> [T]he genius of indigenous culture is unquestionable, but even this is overshadowed by the scale and insistence of the land that inspired it. Geography trumps all. Its logic underpins everything. And after centuries of European settlement it persists, for no post-invasion achievement, no city nor soaring monument can compete with the grandeur of the land. […] Think of the brooding mass and ever-changing face of Uluru. Will architects ever make stone live like this? […] Humans are unlikely to ever manufacture anything as beautiful and intricate. (*Island* 13–4)

Winton's comments are a startling assessment of what constitutes artistic achievement, for in this passage he overturns the conventional idea that art is an activity intimately related to human creativity by suggesting that natural formations like Uluru eclipse even the greatest achievements of human culture. For Winton, the beauty of these formations stands independently of human consciousness, a curious contradiction given that beauty is a quality that has no obvious meaning outside the human sphere—the arrangements of the natural world are surely as devoid of aesthetic intention as they of ethical sense. Despite his insistence otherwise, Winton's view of nature is thus inherently romantic and anthropomorphic, making his attempts to re-establish a harmony between humanity and nature somewhat problematic. Like the problem of breathing, like the problem of art, it is humanity's modern consciousness of itself as both a part of nature and yet, because of this self-consciousness, somehow separate from it, that is precisely the foundation of our alienation from the natural world.

Winton tries to solve this problem of consciousness in *Breath* in two main ways. His first strategy, one that he deploys across his fiction, is to reinvest the natural world with a divine immanence. One might recall from *Cloudstreet*, for instance, Sam Pickles's notion of the 'hairy hand of God', a principle of celestial luck that he believes guides his every decision, or the prophetic visions of Fish Lamb, or the family pig that speaks in tongues, along with numerous other comparable examples. Similar religious notions appear throughout *Breath*, most notably the notion of grace. Grace, of course, is usually aligned with the notion of beauty, and Winton uses the word in this sense, for example, when describing Sando's expertise: 'There was a casual authority in the way he surfed, a grace that made all our moves look jerky and hesitant' (*Breath* 58). More often, however, he uses it in a quasi-theological context, of grace as a feeling of undeserved love and forgiveness. 'Even now, nearly forty years later, every time I see a kid pop to her feet, arms flailing, all milk-teeth and shining skin, I'm there; I know her, and some spark of early promise returns to me like a moment of grace' (26). Winton reiterates the idea in his choice of name for Pike's wife, Grace Andrews (from whom he is symbolically estranged), as well as his encounter, late in the novel, with a defrocked priest. This latter incident exemplifies the ambiguities of Winton's spiritual vision—the accidental nature of their meeting makes their connection seem spontaneous, unconscious, as though it were part of a greater design. Yet the two men spend their time 'laugh[ing] at every shimmering mirage in shared disbelief,' dismissing any kind of 'magical thinking' while at the same time seemingly spellbound by the power of their sceptical consciousness and its ability to see through the illusions thrown up by nature. The human separation from nature, for Winton, parallels its religious alienation—to be in tune with the natural world (as Pike experiences when he is surfing) is equivalent to receiving the blessings of divine grace.

The other, equally problematic way that Winton attempts to resolve this problem is by drawing on the resources of indigenous culture. In *Island Home*, in greater detail than ever before, he expresses his admiration for these cultures and how they have influenced his own thought. 'Largely spurned by settlers, ignored by consolidating colonial

successors, and either patronised, romanticised or politicised by every generation thereafter,' he writes, 'Aboriginal wisdom is the most under-utilised intellectual and emotional resource this country has' (*Island* 189). The key quality he identifies in this wisdom is the indigenous integration into the Australian landscape:

> Those who became the Aboriginal peoples of this continent were almost always required to live nomadically. Their occupation of many regions was seasonal, even notional. Distant but precious country was held by skeins of song and webs of ritual, so even country that was not physically occupied was never empty. Places were intimately known and culturally vital but culture rarely imposed itself in concrete terms. Artifacts and constructions were largely ephemeral and icons required seasonal refreshment. [...] [C]ulture originated in and deferred to country. (12–3)

Winton perceives, correctly, that indigenous culture is rooted in an immanent experience of the natural world, a perspective from which its art and other practices proceed. Since Australia's colonization, this immanent mindset has lived in uneasy tension with the transcendent worldview of modernity, and therein lies the paradox of Winton's prescription. For if the wisdom of indigenous culture lies in its immanent relationship to nature, trying to embrace its practices and mindset in a *self-conscious* manner is a strategy that cannot help but eliminate the immanence it seeks. William Blake demonstrates this truth in *Songs of Innocence* (1789), in which he reveals innocence also to be an immanent state—from the moment one can grasp what innocence is, to name it and describe it, one can no longer be innocent. It is thus impossible to return deliberately to an immanent mindset, because the very consciousness that urges us to make this step simultaneously blocks us from doing so. It is at this impasse that the modern human being (and by extension, modern art) finds itself.

Winton's spiritual pantheism and his interest in indigenous culture are his response to this larger, unresolved issue of modern consciousness. The solution that Pike uses to cope with (but not resolve) this problem is symbolised in the novel by his playing of the didgeridoo. Despite this instrument's association with indigenous culture, it is striking that the young Pike instead learns how to play from Sando:

> That summer he taught me how to play the didjeridu, to sustain the circular breathing necessary to keep up the low, growling drone you could send down the valley from his front steps. [...] I liked the way it sucked energy from me and drew hard feelings up the way only a good tantrum could when I was little. I blew till I saw stars, till a puddle of drool appeared on the step below or until Sando took the thing off me. (*Breath* 125–6)

The circular breathing that Winton seemingly offers here as an example of indigenous wisdom is, in reality, re-appropriated into an entirely different, modern context. For whereas indigenous peoples originally employed the didgeridoo as a communal instrument, attuned to the rhythms of the natural world and the customs derived from it, Pike plays it as a modern individual with no other purpose than to fulfil his own emotional needs. Far from being a genuine return to indigenous traditions, Winton resituates the didgeridoo in this novel in the same startling manner as a work of art by Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol, transforming the object in question by stripping it of its original context (a bicycle wheel, a soup can) and thus recontextualising it.

In *Breath*, then, Winton attempts to grapple with the condition of humanity, through the experiences of Bruce Pike, by considering life from an aesthetic, creative point of view. What he discovers is the steep cost of modern consciousness, for while it provides a certain control over the natural world, it also alienates humanity from that context. Winton treads a familiar path to earlier artists and writers by attempting to overcome that alienation through his engagements with spirituality and pre-modern cultures, but ultimately Pike becomes the exemplar of the modern individual's irresolvable dilemma, yearning endlessly for an immanent world that is no longer accessible. His unsatisfactory solution to this impasse reflects the state of modern art, which is by necessity an art of practical compromise—having pushed the limits as far as he can, Pike learns to integrate his desire for the extreme into the everyday rhythms of his life: 'For a good while I feared excitement. But I found ways through that. I discovered something I was good at, something I could make my own. I am hell's own paramedic' (*Breath* 213). The endless flow of wave upon wave, the repeated pump and release of adrenaline, the eternal sequence of one breath after another: such is the condition of modern humanity, Winton reveals, a cycle in which we must either learn, like Pike and Sando, to enjoy riding for its own repetitive sake or, like Loonie and Eva, face the possibility of destroying ourselves in the search for a false transcendence that, in reality, is death and nihilism in disguise.

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